

Daniel Ellsberg  
July 4, 1988

Report on Recent Research  
and Prospectus for a Political Memoir

Eighteen months ago I laid out an ambitious program for several years' research and writing on risks in the nuclear era. [See the research proposal attached: The Construction of Instability: U.S. First-Use Threats and the Risks of Nuclear War.]

The first year of that project was funded primarily by a grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the last six months funded primarily by grants administered through the Center for Psychological Studies in the Nuclear Era, Harvard Medical School.

The phase of new research--building on many years of prior investigation, both in the government and outside--that I had envisioned in this program is now completed. A heavy writing phase lies ahead.

My research of the last eighteen months has, in fact, in a gratifying number of areas, led me to tentative answers to questions that have occupied me for many years, arising out of my government experience. But these answers remain, inevitably, speculative and fragmentary. What I would equally like to convey is the importance of the questions I have been pursuing so long, together with certain hypotheses, so that more analysts, and in a sense our society as a whole, will begin to address these in like terms.

However, one source of insight for me--my own experience as consultant and official in the national security bureaucracy--has come lately to seem to me so central to understanding both the issues I am addressing and the emphasis and interpretation I give them as to deserve separate and expanded exposition.

I have concluded that the best way I can persuade others to share my own sense of priorities and urgency regarding research--and beyond that, regarding policy and political action--is by a kind of political memoir that will bring together the experiences and pieces of information that brought me to these questions and hypotheses and that gradually shaped my own awareness.

Thus, in addition to writing up the research I have pursued over the last eighteen months--a task that will extend over another twelve to eighteen months--I want to begin at once this

closely-related but separate political memoir. It will be my main work in the next six to twelve months.

To a striking degree, my research agenda, like my political concerns, remains what it became a quarter-century ago, while I was still in the government. For even longer than that, my main preoccupation has been both to understand and to avert the prospect of general nuclear war.

But it was my participation in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 and my official study in 1964, with high-level access to "sensitive" secret information, of decision-making in nuclear crises, that first shaped my present sense of the most likely way that general nuclear war might come about: thus, my sense of the specific phenomena that most need to be understood and prevented.

My own high-level participation in the process of escalating the Vietnam war in 1964-65, my experience in the field in Vietnam in the next two years, followed by my reading of the Pentagon Papers study, all strengthened this sense. And my research since then, including that of the last eighteen months, has sharpened and confirmed it.

What I see as the most likely route to general nuclear war is that an American president--or in the not-too-distant future, some leader of a newly nuclear-armed state--may deliberately choose, in what he sees as a desperate situation, to initiate "limited, tactical" nuclear war in the course of an ongoing non-nuclear conflict. This would probably be in the Third World, against an adversary that did not itself possess nuclear weapons.

He would be gambling that there would no nuclear response in kind from the Soviet Union or other ally of the opponent targetted--because of their fear of general war--or that, at the very worst, any resulting nuclear exchange would be very limited, not involving the homelands of the superpowers. The gamble might fail. General war, and possible nuclear winter, would then be very near.

As I see it, this as-yet-unprecedented presidential gamble would probably be preceded by several others leading up to it, prior steps on an "escalation ladder" that have, in fact, occurred repeatedly. These would probably include:

--a growing U.S. commitment to protect "vital interests" in the area, strengthened by covert U.S. intervention stimulating or taking part in local conflicts.

--after that, a decision to intervene with U.S. combat forces in a local conflict;



--and after that, a U.S. threat of nuclear first-use (of the sort I have found that U.S. presidents have frequently conveyed in the past, in secret from the American public, when U.S. or allied troops were surrounded, or when a new president was confronted by a costly stalemate, as in Korea 1953 or Vietnam 1969).

If general nuclear war does occur, I believe it will most likely come as the culmination of this sequence of events. And I believe--probably more than most other specialists--that this course of events is quite possible, and that in some respects it is becoming more rather than less likely than in earlier decades.

No single step in this ladder makes the subsequent steps of increasing violence certain to occur; but each--if and when it is seen as having failed--sharply increases the probability of the next.

To believe that, as I do, is to see a need to question and resist even the earliest, relatively frequent steps of covert involvement and limited combat intervention, for reasons and with a sense of urgency that did not apply as recently as a generation ago. It is to see these steps as fraught with a magnitude of risk for humanity that simply did not exist in the pre-nuclear era, or even in the first generation of the nuclear era before a rough superpower parity was reached.

My own political activity--opposing covert actions, intervention, first-use threats, and preparations in the arms race for carrying out threats of escalation and preemption--stems from precisely this sense of linkage and of urgency. That is why I have chosen not only to lecture and lobby and write, but also to take part in public acts of nonviolent civil resistance that have brought me several dozen arrests since my trial for releasing the Pentagon Papers.

I remain primarily a researcher. But my research is no longer done in secret, for the eyes alone of men in office. It was precisely in the course of working for such men that I came to see them, and much of what they do, as part of the problem, with regard to human survival.

Indeed, I believe that what such men of power often do in secret needs not only to be resisted, it remains to be adequately understood. That is the prime subject of my continuing research.

In the course of pursuing a better understanding, I have developed much of the evidence and argument for the above propositions over the last seven or eight years, and I have presented them in various preliminary forms.<sup>1</sup> Initially, the most unfamiliar and controversial of my findings was my discovery

of a pattern of secret presidential preparations for or threats of U.S. nuclear first-use during crises or wars. More recently, that has begun to receive a considerable measure of acceptance.<sup>2</sup>

However, continuing discussion of my thesis with other specialists has shown that the most problematic issue remaining is whether an American official would ever carry out a nuclear first-use threat, even if he were led to make such a threat explicitly and it was defied.

The question is, in part, whether past first-use threats should be understood to have been pure bluffs, as these specialists assume (and as I do not).

Of course, it is the case, fortunately, that none of the numerous U.S. first-use threats has been carried out. But a number of these appeared to the president at the time to have worked; at least, they were not defied. And in the case of one that clearly failed--Nixon's secret threat of escalation in the fall of 1969-- it might well have been carried out in the absence of special coincidental circumstances: the "Moratorium," a massive public mobilization against the war.

since  
Hiroshima,  
Nagasaki

Still, a number of these specialists believe that whatever might have been the case in the more distant past when the U.S. had overwhelming nuclear superiority, threats in the world of "nuclear plenty" and rough parity of the last twenty years have lacked all credibility. (It is striking that Nixon, Carter and Reagan have all continued to make such threats, and to back them with weapons developments and deployments at great expense, despite the onset of parity).

These analysts are, in effect, confident that for the indefinite future no American president would conceivably "push the nuclear button" to initiate either strategic or limited tactical nuclear warfare under any circumstances they can imagine, no matter what threats he might have made.

see  
MCN

Much hangs on this judgment: especially on its absolute, or near-absolute tone. For if they are right to be so confident, then first-use threats, and the interventions or covert actions that may lead to them, and the developments in the arms race that support threats or escalation, are not, after all, so fraught with ultimate risk as I have been trying to convey.

Presid.  
of PO

U.S. interventions and the arms race may still be seen as too costly or not sufficiently rewarding--which is, in fact the main objection to them by the American public<sup>3</sup>--but need not be seen or rejected as significantly dangerous.

The reasoning of these specialists and much of the public is simple and obvious, in regard to morality, prudence, and the



nature of the American government. To initiate nuclear warfare, even on the most "limited" scale, would kill too many people, too many non-combatants. And even against a non-nuclear ally of the Soviet Union, let alone against Soviet forces, it would involve too great a risk of catastrophic retaliation. No president that the American people would elect could ever do it.

They take for granted, in effect: American officials don't massacre "innocents"; and they don't take risks of catastrophe. At least, they don't do such things knowingly and deliberately, with the kind of awareness and foresight that the prospect of initiating nuclear operations would force on them. And if they were tempted to do so, by the pressure of events or some personal lapse of judgment, their colleagues and advisors or subordinates would correct them.

Thus, they believe, the "human factor" will save us--at least until more weapons get into the hands of Third World dictators, less "responsible" than American or, for that matter, Soviet leaders.

Plausible. This view is widely accepted, by Americans, as common sense.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, a contrary judgment (which I hold) risks being seen as so unreasonably distrustful of American leadership as to be unpatriotic. There is no way to prove these analysts and other citizens are wrong; one desperately hopes they are not. But how much should we stake on their prediction? Is their confidence justified?

Both my experience and my research over more than 25 years tell me that it is not.

My research of the last nine months in particular has concentrated, in the words of my earlier research proposal, on "the moral and psychological universe of high-level national security managers, as this bears on the risks of nuclear war arising out of threats and commitments."

More precisely, it has focussed on the three specific aspects of "the human factor" raised above:

--The secret readiness of men in power to use massacre as an instrument of policy: readiness to slaughter noncombatants, or threaten it, whether by conventional bombing, nuclear weapons, or--in the case of U.S. policy, usually by encouraging and supporting proxies--by death-squads or programs of genocide<sup>5</sup>;

--The secret readiness of men in power to gamble with catastrophe: readiness to undertake courses of action predicted by advisors to have a high and disproportionate risk of moral and political disaster, rather than to accept a limited, humiliating failure<sup>6</sup>;

*Tendency to see them as ends, but lesser ends, compared to*

"  
e.g. of  
our novel  
(HST, 45)  
Hiss in  
myth

2. easily  
without  
agreed  
deliberate

Kalman  
+ Tversky

--The secret readiness of subordinates to carry out policies they perceive as disastrous and perhaps immoral, in some cases long after any hope of justification has been overwhelmed by evidence of failure, risk and wrong-doing.<sup>7</sup>

My work under these categories remains to be written up in the next research period. Of my findings it is enough to say here that I find compelling evidence that many American officials over the last forty years, along with officials of other countries, have shown--to a dismaying degree, far more than most Americans imagine--the kinds of readiness described above.

I anticipate considerable intellectual and emotional resistance to such findings from Americans who have not looked at this evidence. Indeed, I can sympathize with fellow citizens who find painful--as well as problematic and offensive--the very thought of approaching data on American policymaking under such categories.

The information and experience I gained inside the government that led me to such explorations was painful for me too, even anguishing, and it still is. (The same is true for some of the most recent data, new to me, on U.S. covert encouragement of death-squad operations in Central and South America and genocide in Indonesia. I can still be shocked.)

If these conclusions betoken distrust of American men in power, I can say in the words of a recent television commercial that I came by that distrust "the old-fashioned way: I earned it" by working for such men, perhaps too long too trustingly. This story has yet to be told. It is the subject of a political memoir, which I propose to begin, even before reporting fully on my recent scholarly research.

To be sure, in 1988 it is no longer a new position for me to express public skepticism of high officials. It was seventeen years ago that I went on trial facing a possible 115 years in prison for releasing to the Senate and the press thousands of pages of top secret documents that were highly embarrassing to the historical record of five presidents, four of whom I had served as a high-level consultant or official.

Yet ten years before that, in 1961, I had been given the job of drafting, essentially to my own specifications, the Kennedy Administration's top secret guidance to the Joint Chiefs of Staff for their operational plans for general nuclear war. I was given that task in part because, from earlier work on the most sensitive aspects of the nuclear command and control process, I had learned more about nuclear war plans than any other civilian in the country.



Obviously, during that decade something had changed for me, above all in my attitude toward the office of the President, including my willingness to keep its secrets. Not in my loyalty to the country; that was not challenged even by my prosecutor, and a psychological profile prepared on me (secretly and illegally) by the CIA concluded correctly that I had acted "out of a higher sense of patriotism."

The very reason I had access to the sort of documents that I later revealed is that I had, and deserved, a reputation for extreme discretion and loyalty to my civilian bosses, tested qualities that had led to my being trusted with an extraordinary variety of closely-held secrets. Obviously, my loyalty reflected my own trust in their basic judgment, a confidence that we shared the same fundamental values and views of the national interest.

A commitment to keep their secrets and to help them carry out policies with which I might sometimes disagree was simply the price of sharing the secret data available to high-level officials in the national security apparatus and enjoying the chance to influence their views. Throughout most of the Sixties I had no real doubt that the bargain was well worthwhile.

Indeed, that confidence--shared by virtually all my colleagues--seemed unassailable to me. It seemed self-evident that furthering and influencing to the best of my talents the efforts of the president and his top national security advisors, whoever they might be, was the best way I could possibly serve my country.

But it was precisely what I came to learn in this dozen years working for these men that finally made me seek, and find, a better way. That required me, among other things, to disobey their orders to conceal various truths from the Congress, courts and public. I did that, though I expected to go to prison for the rest of my life for doing it.

Why? The Pentagon Papers speak for themselves; but they don't tell the full answer to that question. They were never all that I meant to reveal. Somewhat paradoxically, given what I have just said about my attitudes in the Sixties, some of my present concerns about national policy and the men who manage it were rooted in experiences I had very early in that decade. That was while I was still "deep in the belly of the whale" as a consultant and official, even before I worked on Vietnam.

Some of these experiences provided unsettling glimpses--esoteric even by the standards of a period when nearly everything I read was classified secret or top secret--of calculations that informed high-level decision-making. They revealed, in some of the men I was serving--despite their being conscientious,

patriotic people--notions of what was permissible and what risks were worth taking that were startlingly different from values and constraints I had supposed we shared.

Perhaps I can best convey the import of the memoir that needs writing by describing briefly some of these incidents in the course of the Sixties--matters I have not set down before--that shaped my lasting preoccupations and eventually challenged my vocation of helping and advising men in power.

Here, then, are several fragments of a political memoir.

ITEM: While I was in the process of writing new guidance for the nuclear war plans in 1961, I drafted a number of questions on the existing plans to be sent to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

From what I knew of the nuclear war planning process, which at that time was probably more than any other civilian, I believed that an honest answer to any one of these questions would be acutely embarrassing to the Chiefs and their Joint Staff. The point of asking the questions, most of which were sent to the JCS by the Deputy Secretary of Defense, was to weaken bureaucratic resistance to the radical changes in war planning I was proposing.

One of these questions was picked up by the White House and sent to the JCS in the name of President Kennedy. The question was:

"If your current plans for general nuclear war were carried out as planned, how many people would be killed in the Soviet Union and China?"

The plans in question called for the U.S. to initiate full-scale nuclear attacks on "the Sino-Soviet Bloc" in the event of non-nuclear combat arising--under any circumstances, anywhere in the world--between U.S. and Soviet combat units. Thus, they could have been triggered by a clash, say, between a U.S. division and a Soviet division arising over access to Berlin, in the crisis later that year: or by such a clash in Cuba, as might have arisen the following year.

These plans presumed explicitly that under the most likely circumstances, escalation from non-nuclear to strategic nuclear warfare would be initiated by the U.S. Thus, I was asking for the fatalities planned to be inflicted by U.S. nuclear forces, not in retaliation to a Soviet nuclear "first-strike" on the U.S., but in the course of a U.S. strategic first-strike.



To my considerable surprise, this particular question (unlike the others) got a prompt and apparently realistic reply. That was not what I had anticipated, in suggesting it. On the contrary, I expected to force the JCS to admit that they had never carefully considered this question, that they simply did not know the real answer.

I had reason to suppose this was the case--that no such estimate existed--but I turned out to be mistaken. A response arrived at the White House almost immediately. It was on a single sheet of paper, stamped top secret and, more significantly, addressed "for the eyes only" of the President. But since I had drafted the question the answer was shown to me.

Thus I held in my hand, one day in the spring of 1961, a piece of paper showing one of the most tightly-held secrets in the government: the number of people American military leaders planned to kill in the Soviet Union and China if their operational plans for escalating a war with the Soviet Union were implemented.

The answer was in the form of a graph, a rising line that related fatalities on the vertical axis, in millions of deaths, against time on the horizontal axis, in months from the time of attack. The line rose over time not because of repeated attacks--virtually all of the U.S. attacks would be in the first 24 hours, when the greater part of the fatalities would occur--but because it took time for the clouds of radioactive fallout to drift and settle, and for many of the victims of lethal burns and radiation to die. The high point of the line, on the right of the graph, showed the number of people who would die from our attacks within six months after the execution of the plans.

The number was 325 million dead.

That was for the Soviet Union and China alone, which was what I had asked. (It was a peculiar feature of late Eisenhower-era war planning, which reflected outdated notions of a monolithic "Sino-Soviet Bloc," that in the event of war with the Soviet Union, no matter how it arose or where, U.S. forces would at the outset attack every major city in China, as well as every major city in the Soviet Union).

Subsequent questions brought equally prompt calculations of fatalities elsewhere. Another hundred million or so would die in the Eastern European countries of the Warsaw Pact--the "captive nations"--from U.S. attacks on air defenses and military installations in these countries.

Fallout from our surface explosions on the Soviet Union, China and the satellites would decimate the populations of neutral nations bordering these countries--e.g., Finland, Sweden,

Austria and Afghanistan--as well as Japan and Pakistan. These fatalities from U.S. attacks, up to a hundred million depending on wind conditions (and measures, if any, of warning and fallout protection), would occur without a single U.S. warhead landing on the territory of these countries outside the NATO and Warsaw Pacts.

Finns, for example, given prevailing wind conditions, would be virtually exterminated by the fallout from high-yield ground bursts on Soviet submarine pens in the vicinity of Leningrad.

Among the population of our NATO allies in Western Europe, fatalities from fallout from U.S. attacks on Warsaw Pact targets would depend very much on wind conditions, which would vary with the season. As General Gavin, testifying before Congress in the Fifties, had revealed, these allied fatalities from our own attacks could be up to a hundred million deaths "depending on which way the wind blows."

The total death-count from planned U.S. attacks--before allowing for any Soviet retaliation--was in the neighborhood of 600 million dead.

ITEM: On the night of President Kennedy's television announcement of the existence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, Monday, October 22, 1962, my friend Harry Rowen, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Plans and Policy, International Security Affairs, asked me to come to Washington to help out. I took the next plane from Los Angeles and spent several days of that week sleeping on a sofa in the Pentagon.

I worked on two of the three Working Groups that reported that week to the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (Excom), an ad hoc group that sat with the President and managed the Cuban Missile Crisis. One of these, chaired by Walt Rostow in the State Department, did "long range planning," looking two weeks ahead. The other, under Rowen in Defense, made plans for an air strike against the air defenses and missiles and an invasion of Cuba, scheduled tentatively for Monday or Tuesday, October 29 or 30.

On Saturday night, the 27th, Robert Kennedy delivered the President's ultimatum to Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin: if the missiles were not removed immediately they would be struck. He set (he later told me) a 48-hour deadline. He also warned that U.S. reconnaissance flights over Cuba would continue, and that if one more plane was shot down--as had happened that very morning--the U.S. would launch air strikes immediately. He rejected the Soviet proposal for ending the crisis, a public trade of the



Soviet missiles in Cuba for removal of the comparable U.S. missiles in Turkey.<sup>8</sup>

President Kennedy was convinced that if he had to carry out this ultimatum, the Soviets would almost surely retaliate by attacking our missiles in Turkey. On Saturday afternoon, October 27, Rowen was asked by Secretary McNamara, for the Excom, to lay out alternative options for a U.S. response to a Soviet non-nuclear attack on the U.S. missiles assigned to NATO, in Turkey. Harry called me in to work on this, and the two of us sat at opposite sides of his desk, writing as fast as we could.

The first option we presented was "No further U.S. response": in effect calling it "even," missiles destroyed in Turkey for missiles destroyed in Cuba, seeking to end hostilities there. We took some pride, I recall, in beginning with that, since we felt that few advisors in that era would have had the nerve to include that as a policy option.

Other choices included non-nuclear reprisal on the Soviet base from which their attack had been launched; or on several more bases; with or without hitting Soviet air defense bases...

Despite the assignment, I believed it very unlikely that the Soviets would risk hitting our missiles in Turkey even if we did attack theirs in Cuba. Harry and I were even more confident that the chance of nuclear war erupting from this confrontation was extremely low. We presumed that was also the attitude of the President and his lieutenants on the Excom.

We knew, of course, that a large part of the public, not only in the U.S. but throughout the world, thought otherwise. But the basic reason for our own confidence was our awareness of the overwhelming strategic nuclear superiority of the United States. And that, we knew, was not nearly so clear to the public.

After all, Kennedy had run for election in 1960 largely on the issue of a supposed "missile gap" favoring the Soviets. When he had discovered in office, in the fall of 1961, that the real missile (and bomber) gap was grossly in favor of the U.S., he did not make a dramatic effort to inform the public of just how wrong he had been. As a result, the public did not realize--indeed, the reality was still highly classified--how very little the Soviets actually had in the way of nuclear forces threatening the U.S.

In the fall of 1962 the U.S. had several hundred intercontinental, intermediate-range and sub-launched warheads and 3000 bombers within range of the Soviet Union. On the other side, the Soviets had at that time about 10 operational ICBM's within range of the United states (aside from the highly

vulnerable missiles on Cuba, not yet operational) and about 190 intercontinental bombers.

Facing that near-monopoly of U.S. strategic nuclear power against the Soviet Union, it was inconceivable to us that Khrushchev would initiate nuclear operations under almost any circumstances. Indeed, I was confident, "Khrushchev had to back down."

In that belief I backed the blockade, and the implicit threat of an air strike, which seemed likely to me to cause the Soviets to withdraw. Indeed, I didn't think it would be necessary to carry out an air strike in order to get rid of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Nor did I believe it would be necessary to trade away our missiles in Turkey, an option which, like the majority of the Excom, I strongly opposed for reasons of NATO solidarity.

However, if an air strike did take place and if the Soviets did, against all odds, recklessly confront us in Europe or at sea, one thing was unequivocally clear to Rowen and me: the U.S. should not initiate nuclear war under any circumstances, no matter what threats it might have made.

Based on a conversation I had had with Secretary McNamara in 1961--which I had been warned afterward to keep entirely to myself--I believed that he and the President shared this view (in contrast to their public, official statements). This was a key basis for my strong sense of personal loyalty to McNamara.

What this added up to was that the Soviets seemed to us likely to back down to U.S. firm non-nuclear threats, and even if they did not, there was almost no chance that either side would resort to nuclear weapons.

Thus our views in 1962--without defending them here--were at least consistent with our support of the fairly threatening posture and active "pressures" the Excom had chosen from the beginning. We assumed that the Excom members we were serving in a staff role thought much the same way. Indeed, my notes reveal that sometime during that week, Harry Rowen remarked to me, "I think the Executive Committee puts the chance of nuclear war very low, though they still may overestimate it by ten times. They may put it at 1 in 100."

He himself would have said the odds were "1 in 1000."

But the day after the crisis ended, on Monday, October 29, he informed me that his boss, Paul Nitze, had just told him that he had put the chance of some form of nuclear war, if we had struck the missiles on Cuba, as "fairly high." And his estimate



of the risk, Nitze thought, was the lowest in the Excom; everyone else put it higher.

Harry had asked him what odds he would have given. Nitze's answer was:

"1 in 10."

I remember vividly my reaction, that Monday, to this news. It came in two parts.

First, puzzlement: why would they put the risk that high? How could they figure that either side was that ready to go to nuclear war? Could it be that Nitze, and the others, like the public, had not really absorbed the new intelligence on the strategic balance, or that they didn't fully believe it?

Second, slightly delayed: "One in ten????!! Of nuclear war?! ...And we were doing what we were doing?!"

(What the U.S. had been doing, by order of the Excom, included: (1) the blockade itself; (2) forcing Soviet submarines to surface; (3) high-level and low-level reconnaissance flights over Cuba; (4) a large-scale airborne alert with significant risk of accidents involving nuclear weapons; (5) continuing reconnaissance, even after several planes were fired on and one shot down on Saturday; (6) full preparations--if they were wholly a bluff, they fooled us--for invasion and airstrike...to which could be added (8) Robert Kennedy's official 48-hour ultimatum on Saturday night and the warning he delivered that if a second recon plane were shot down the airstrike would follow immediately...)

I believed that the stakes in this confrontation, in global political terms, were quite high. I was prepared to support non-nuclear threats, willing to take some risks of conventional war; I was, in short, a cold warrior working for the Defense Department.

But to be willing to take a 10% chance of nuclear war?!...In order to avoid a public trade of the Turkish missiles?

Who were these people I was working for? Were the civilians no better than the military? Was the President insane?

I would not have felt better if I had known what Ted Sorenson revealed later about the President's own odds during the crisis that it would end in general nuclear war<sup>9</sup> :

"Somewhere between one out of three and even."

ITEM: In the summer and fall of 1967, when I had left Vietnam, rejoined the Rand Corporation, and was spending my time in Washington consulting on the war, I found the upper reaches of the national security apparatus as disillusioned and pessimistic about our intervention as I was myself.

Since my return in July I had been steadily urging high officials--including Secretary McNamara, Assistant Secretary William Bundy, Undersecretary of State Elliott Richardson, Ambassador Harriman and others--to find a way to end our involvement. I found no intellectual resistance to the aim of extrication. With only two exceptions I can remember--one of them being Walt Rostow at the White House--I met with little disagreement at all.

Ironically, this was a time when a majority of the public favored, in polls, stepping up our attacks in Vietnam, while only about a third agreed with me that we should get out. This was the only period during the war, as it happens, that my views were out of line with the dominant view in the public. But I was not out of step with my colleagues in the Executive Branch who were close to Vietnam policymaking. They were, at this point, considerably more "dovish" than the public.

Thus, I found occupying essentially Harry Rowen's old job as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (International Security Affairs), Morton H. Halperin, a long-time colleague who had earlier held my former position as Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary after I went to Vietnam. Already then, I knew, he had been more skeptical of the war than I was, and his confidence in it had gone downhill in the years since. He didn't hide his views; nor did he have to, from his new boss, Paul Warnke, who had never, so far as I knew, supported the war for a moment.

In the summer of 1967 McNamara himself--with major staff support from Warnke, launched a devastating attack, in Congressional testimony, on the efficacy and promise of the bombing program, which he had initially promoted and over which he officially presided. That fall he addressed personal memos to President Johnson calling heretically for a negotiated solution with the Viet Cong and an end to the bombing. (Johnson told reporters off-the-record, "McNamara's gone dovish on me," and proceeded to fire him, announcing without warning that he was promoting McNamara to the World Bank).

Meanwhile, McNamara had sponsored a secret study group to prepare a history that later became known as the Pentagon Papers, officially titled "History of U.S. Decision-making in Vietnam,



1965-68." Because of my own past study of crises and my experience both in Washington and Vietnam, I was one of the first to be asked to take part in the study.

I joined over thirty analysts, nearly all military officers, from all three services. They had not been chosen for their policy views, least of all for opposition to official policy. But I did not find one who was markedly less dovish or pessimistic than I was, or even in basic disagreement with me.

These officers had been selected largely for their analytical ability; but their uniformity of opinion--not representative of American public opinion, at this particular time--reflected another criterion they shared: service in Vietnam. That was enough for each of them to know that what their former commander, General Westmoreland, was telling Congress and the press that fall was false.

The President had brought Westmoreland back from Vietnam to announce to a Joint Session of Congress and to the press that there was, emphatically, "no stalemate" in Vietnam, that we were winning, and that victory was in sight.

The truth we knew was that what we had in Vietnam was a stalemate, that we were not winning, and that victory for us was nowhere in sight and almost surely never would be. That is what these knowledgeable officers had learned in Vietnam, as I had. Most of them were hawks by any other criterion; several later held high-level positions in the right wing of the Reagan Administration.

There is no polling data on attitudes within the government. But from 1967-70 I was in an unusually good position to have a sense of opinions throughout the upper levels of the national security apparatus. As a RAND analyst, untied to any particular bureaucratic base, I consulted widely, maintaining contacts from a decade of interagency consulting and service as an official in Defense and State. The unmistakable impression I formed was that the disillusioned attitudes of the officers on the secret McNamara Study Group were very widespread in the Pentagon, State and CIA by the end of 1967, even among those who had not served in Vietnam.

Soon after the Tet Offensive in February, 1968, I believe, these attitudes became virtually universal inside the government. It was at this time that majority opinion in the public, too, swung against the war, led, one might say, by Walter Cronkite, who pronounced the dread word, "stalemate" on the nightly news. This new majority for ending our involvement was not, in fact, in any contrast to opinions with the national security apparatus.



On the contrary, what I am reporting--I have never seen this remarked elsewhere--is that this majority sentiment had already been anticipated the previous fall within knowledgeable circles in Washington, which were even more pessimistic than the public after Tet.

As of June, 1968, there was still a sizeable minority of the public, 35%, favoring an increased commitment, with 25% calling for a "crash effort" to win the war, which would have meant primarily more bombing (8% favored nuclear weapons in September). I found it virtually impossible to run across any such views in the Pentagon or State Department.

There was particular disillusionment with the bombing of North Vietnam. Some of the Joint Chiefs may have been furious with McNamara for his opposition to increased--or even continued--bombing in the summer of 1967, but after Tet their staffers were not. One didn't need access to classified information to notice that the bombing campaign had neither discouraged nor deterred the North Vietnamese or Viet Cong, nor stopped a flow of supplies from North Vietnam sufficient to support simultaneous attacks in every province of South Vietnam.

So much for the effectiveness of a program that had exploded, by the time that McNamara left the Pentagon on 1 March, 1968, 1.5 million tons of bombs on Vietnam, as much as the U.S. had dropped on all of Europe in World War II. It was hard to believe that still more bombing would have a stronger effect. No one I knew in the government did believe that, in the spring of 1968: or, so far as I could tell, thereafter.

Mort Halperin, who was in an even better position to judge this mood, summed it up in the late spring of 1968. "You should realize," Halperin remarked to me, "there are just three people in this government who still believe in what we're doing. Johnson, Rusk and Rostow. That's it."

An arresting comment. He was referring to the whole policy, but particularly to the bombing. It took only a few moments--reviewing one's mental file of the relevant players--to realize that his estimate was not a rhetorical exaggeration. It really was hard, in fact impossible, to think of significant exceptions to that generalization. Probably Westmoreland in Saigon; not, by then, the Chiefs. Not anyone else we could think of, then or for the rest of that year.

And though Nixon and Kissinger continued--contrary to their public image--in the religion of Johnson and Rusk, and for some there was a brief infatuation with the prospects of "Vietnamization," Halperin's observation held for the general reaches of the national security bureaucracy, above all regarding the bombing effort, for the remainder of the war.



But the war had seven years to go.

In the remaining ten months of 1968 after Tet, the Defense Department dropped another 1.7 million tons of bombs on Vietnam, or somewhat more than McNamara had dropped over the previous three years. This was done under Clark Clifford, who had lost all faith in the war, and Paul Warnke, who never had any, both of whom were pinning all their hopes on a negotiated end to it.

By the time they left office, the Johnson Administration had dropped 3.2 million tons of bombs on Indochina. That was 50% more than the total tonnage--2 million tons--the U.S. had dropped in all theaters of World War II (including the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki).

The Nixon Administration dropped another 4.5 million tons. For his achievement of "winding down the war" (or "widening down the war," as a State Department wag described the Cambodian invasion), Henry Kissinger got a Nobel Peace Prize, having together with his boss exploded more of Nobel's product on humans than any two men in history.

In all, 7.7 million tons of high explosives were dropped on Indochina (in addition to approximately the same tonnage of artillery shells). For most of the war the rate of bombing averaged about one million tons a year, which is the equivalent of a Nagasaki-type atomic bomb--20,000 tons of TNT--each week. A Nagasaki a week, every week for seven and a half years.

Of this total, four times as much--over six million tons--was dropped after the Tet Offensive as before it.

The Tet Offensive had, in fact, crystallized the disillusionment with the war not only in the public, which was paying for the bombs, but--if anything still more--within the government apparatus that was dropping them. But the bombs continued to get dropped. In the spring of 1968 the war had three more World War II's to go.

Outside the White House, officials had lost faith. But it was the President's wish--first Johnson's, then Nixon's--that the bombing and the war continue, in pursuit of terms they never did achieve (and were never likely to, never even close). And their wishes got carried out, without noticeable friction: so far as I could tell, in Halperin's phrase, by people under them who almost uniformly did not believe in what they were doing.

I have been trying to understand that for a long time.

-----

The three personal experiences I have chosen to recount above correspond respectively--not by coincidence--to the three aspects of the "moral and psychological universe of national security managers" on which my research of the last nine months has focussed:

- readiness to massacre;
- readiness to risk catastrophe, in order to avert failure.
- readiness to follow leaders, into massacre and/or catastrophe.

Each of these experiences posed a question for me, to which I have been seeking answers ever since.

In each case, in fact, the question in the first instance took the form: "How could they have done this, knowing what they knew?"

"They" were my bosses, my colleagues, my friends: people about whom it was customary for me to say "we." In 1961 and again in 1968 and after, that meant my colleagues on planning staffs, civilian and military. In 1962, it meant the president himself, and his top advisors.

In 1961 the questions in my head went on: "How could Americans have made these plans, these calculations? How could the staff colonels that I talk to every day, that I eat lunch with and drink beer with in the evening, spend their workdays making plans--in the event of conflict anywhere with Russian troops--to multiply the Holocaust a hundred times?"

I felt then, and still do, that the very existence of these plans in America, and the multitude of preparations to carry them out, represented a moral catastrophe for this country. And a Sphinx's riddle as well, which we must somehow learn to interpret.

Nor do the plans I wrote look much better to me now. I was there too: all the more so during Vietnam, when real bombs were falling. For too many of those years I was one of those who pursued obediently a policy in major aspects of which I did not believe. So introspection and empathy are among the sources of understanding to which I must turn. "How could we? How could I?" are also questions I must ask, along with a more hopeful one: "What woke me up? What helped me to escape?"<sup>10</sup> Good questions for a memoir.

-----

*Revised  
for '95*



# ENDNOTES

1. (p. 3) See attachments: "A Call to Mutiny," 1981; "Preventing the Rising Risk of World War III," 1983; "First Strike, You're Out," 1985; "The Construction of Instability" (lecture to the Institute for the Study of the USA and Canada, USSR), 1987; and Research Proposal, December 1986.

2. (p. 4) The 1987 Brookings Institution study, Nuclear Blackmail and Nuclear Balance by Richard Betts, is the first effort by a mainstream institutional analyst to address the pattern of threats I first revealed in "A Call to Mutiny," [attached] which Betts cites in the first pages of his text. He essentially confirms my propositions (though neglecting the issue of the linkage between these threats and the strategic arms race, or the motives of U.S. interventions).

3. (p.4) See the data in my "Blind Man's Bluffs," attached.

4. (p. 5) As this copy was being proofread, the latest polling information on public attitudes was received (5 July, 1988), in National Survey No. 6, June, 1988, Americans Talk Security. Their note on this issue is as follows:

"Many national surveys have documented the American people's rejection of the First Use nuclear doctrine and this survey reinforces those other findings. The poll also reveals the people would be reluctant to use nuclear weapons, even under severe provocation.

"In 1984, in a landmark survey on nuclear arms policy conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation, Daniel Yankelovich wrote the following analysis about public misunderstanding of U.S. nuclear Doctrine.

'There are other areas of consensus where people's views are also held firmly and consistently, and some of them reveal serious misconceptions about what U.S. nuclear policy actually is. For example, by 69% to 22%, the majority deny that it is current policy of the United States to use nuclear weapons against the Soviets "if the Soviets invade Europe or Japan with soldiers and tanks... if they don't use nuclear weapons." Virtually all Americans (81%)

mistakenly believe it is our policy to use nuclear weapons "if, and only if, the Soviets attack the United States first with nuclear weapons." This basic misconception about the purposes of the American nuclear arsenal represents a major disconnection between government policy and public understanding. It may explain much of the current confusion on nuclear issues.'

"Four years later, American rejection of the underlying principles behind the First Use doctrine seem intact: When asked under what circumstances the use of nuclear weapons might be justified, the people rejected their use except in the event an American city was destroyed by a limited nuclear attack.

"Using nuclear weapons to repel a successful, but conventional, Soviet invasion of Europe was rejected by 11 to 1 margins.

"The Public Agenda Foundation conducted an exhaustive three-year study of American attitudes on U.S.-Soviet relations and the proper use of nuclear weapons was a frequent topic of the project's focus group research. John Doble, who helped coordinate the PAF project, found that, even when the First Use doctrine is carefully explained, Americans refuse to believe the U.S. government would ever implement the policy."

A chart headed "Proper Use of U.S. Nuclear Weapons" shows that the proportion of the public in favor of using nuclear weapons in the event that "Soviets have successfully invaded Western Europe without using nuclear weapons" is 8%; 88% oppose. Even in the event of a "Limited nuclear attack waged on American military forces in combat," only 37% would favor a nuclear response; 57% would oppose.

The only case in which a bare majority--50% versus 44%--would favor a US nuclear response would be on the premise, "One American city is destroyed by limited nuclear attack." (Presumably, from earlier polling, this majority would be higher in the event of a massive attack on U.S. cities--though even here a sizeable minority would oppose a nuclear response).

Doble's finding corroborates what I have long guessed from my own smaller sample of discussions: that the public tends to regard U.S. nuclear first-use threats as pure bluff (hence, not ultimately dangerous to U.S. security), even when they are made aware of those threats (a rare condition) and when the threats are formal and explicit, as in U.S. commitments to NATO strategy for the "defense" of Western Europe. In this, they are simply assuming that "real, operational" US/NATO strategy is in accord with what they correctly see as common prudence. This assumption could not be more incorrect.

Moreover, the gap between public attitudes and those of



"experts"/specialists is not only on the question of what U.S. official declaratory policy is; I am aware of a comparable gap as to what U.S. "action policy" (i.e., policy as to whether a threat should be carried out if defied) is and what it should be. Most experts not only understand but support current NATO policy, both in its declaratory and its action aspects. Thus, they know that the U.S. is very likely to carry out its threats to initiate at least tactical nuclear warfare in the event of a major Soviet non-nuclear incursion into Western Europe; and they also believe that it should do this. They would take the same position, if anything more strongly, on the premise of a Soviet nuclear attack on U.S. forces anywhere in the world.

I would agree with the public's position, not that of the majority of "experts," that the U.S. should not initiate nuclear warfare on any level under any circumstances whatever. But the public is flat wrong to imagine that under current practices of deployment and planning, U.S. forces would not do this under many circumstances. In this sense the "experts" are, unfortunately, right.

(Where I describe in the text above my disagreement with experts as to what U.S. forces would do with respect to carrying out a nuclear first-use threat, it has to do with a U.S. threat against a non-nuclear Third World opponent, not against a Soviet non-nuclear attack. Most "experts" are unaware that the U.S. has frequently made the former type of threat at all, until I have presented the evidence for this.)

5. (p. 5) See bibliography, attached: "Moral and Psychological Universe of Decision-makers: Just War Theory; Ethics of Deterrence; Psychological and Bureaucratic Aspects of Genocide and Massacre; Strategic Bombing; Terrorism; Covert Action; Ethics and Gender." In terms of my reading over the last nine months, this particular bibliography is incomplete with respect to US covert involvement in Third World massacre.

In my work I use the word "terrorism" in a technical sense, meaning "the deliberate killing of non-combatants for a political purpose." I use the word massacre to mean the same, on a large scale. "Non-combatants" refers to unarmed civilians including civilian members of a political party or cadre, as well as the traditional categories of "innocents": women, children, old, and sick.

Americans like to believe, understandably, that neither word could be used objectively about deliberate U.S. government programs, or those of U.S. allies, whether covert or overt, wartime or peacetime.

However, the widespread, comfortable notion that American



officials could not knowingly and deliberately countenance operations in wartime that slaughtered enormous numbers of non-combatants cannot survive a close look at the decision-making surrounding the targetting of civilians in the strategic bombing campaign against Japan in World War II, long before the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Or at the earlier, comparable decision-making by our close ally Britain, with American approval, during its aptly-named campaign of "terror bombing" against Germany.

I began my own investigation of this history more than thirty years ago, and have over the last eighteen months brought my study up to date. I have long believed that knowledge of strategic bombing doctrines and practice in World War II and earlier was crucial to understanding many aspects of the nuclear era, including the moral/psychological issue raised here of the quasi-terrorist nature of nuclear planning with respect to the planned massacre of civilians.

In effect, I believe that in connection with their bombing programs from 1942 on, British and American top policymakers and their staffs secretly abandoned the central wartime constraint of Just War Doctrine, as embodied in religious ethics and international law: the absolute immunity of non-combatants from deliberate attack. What is in effect a secret new ethic of policymakers, in other states as well--erasing the distinction, for purposes of targetting, between combatants and civilians--has had a profound effect, I believe, on planning for covert operations and for nuclear war as well, and on thus the security of civilians throughout the world.

6. (p. 5) See bibliographies attached, on The Cuban Missile Crisis and on Decision Theory. In connection with these, I might note my appreciation for the research assistance that grant funding has made possible over the last eighteen months. It has enabled me to pursue references on a scale I have not enjoyed since I left the Rand Corporation.

As my reading list on the Cuban Missile Crisis indicates, I have completed in the last nine months a comprehensive investigation of that crisis, in preparation for a major analytical case study. As I see it, potential lessons from this episode touch on nearly every aspect of the nuclear era.

In utilising major new data which has recently become available, I have the advantage of my earlier findings from a year-long, highly-classified study of nuclear crises that I undertook for the government in 1964. For a brief account of just a few of the new interpretations issuing from my recent work--on why the crisis ended as it did, and how close it came to war--see my New York Times OpEd piece (attached) and the related



article by Seymour Hersh stemming largely from interviews with me (attached).

I have likewise analysed, as a case study in "gambling with catastrophe," President Johnson's decision to make an open-ended troop commitment to ground combat in Vietnam in 1965, drawing particularly on Larry Berman, Planning a Tragedy: The Americanization of the War in Vietnam (New York and London, W.W. Norton, 1982), and on later work by Berman. Newly-released files from the White House--not known to me at the time or to the authors of the Pentagon Papers--show that this decision was made in the face of unusually emphatic and uncannily prescient warnings to the President from some of his most trusted advisors. These included statements that his course was "rash to the point of folly" and was not headed for "anything but catastrophe."

In other cases of disasters I have examined, from the Challenger explosion to Chernobyl, it is startling to discover how often the possibility of catastrophic failure was foreseen, often as a high probability, before the risky course of action was chosen over alternatives that were urged by some advisors as much safer.

I have found it very fruitful to examine this perplexing behavior--so relevant to the issue of possible risk-taking in a future nuclear crisis--in the light of hypotheses suggested by the experimental work of the psychologists Kahneman and Tversky on gambling behavior and decision-making under uncertainty (see Decision Theory bibliography).

In particular, they have found in a wide variety of risk-taking contexts--though they have not so far applied their findings to political decision-making--that subjects will choose an option with a high and seemingly disproportionate risk of an extremely negative outcome--if it offers as well some chance of "coming out even, avoiding loss"--if the only alternative is a course that offers a certainly of loss, even if that sure loss is relatively small.

In political contexts, I find this a very powerful, explanatory hypothesis, in cases where the alternative of a "sure loss" represents a humiliating setback for the decision-maker personally, perhaps threatening him with the loss of a job or an election, even though the societal consequences may not otherwise seem great.

One finds decision-makers in hierarchical positions of power (usually male; I suspect there is a gender aspect in this) frequently acting as if this prospective personal loss of status or role were a "catastrophe" fully comparable, say, to a major inflation or the disastrous escalation of a war. They may take a high risk of the latter social catastrophe in the longer run, in

order to avoid a short-run certainty of a "catastrophic" personal setback.

7. (p. 6) See bibliography on Obedience, attached. When I first read Stanley Milgram's Obedience to Authority in the early Seventies, I felt I understood, at last, the long complicity of many of my former colleagues in the Pentagon with a war in which they had ceased to believe, and earlier, in the construction of nuclear war plans in which no one could ever have believed. (See the two "fragments of a memoir," below, on my experience of these situations).

Milgram's experiments, the most famous in social psychology, revealed the startling willingness of most ordinary subjects, who had accepted a structure of authority, to obey rules that led them, apparently, to inflict extreme pain--in the form of electric shocks, up to potentially lethal levels--on innocent victims. Incentive and conditioning to act like "good Germans" is widely effective, Milgram demonstrated, on American citizens, though we are scarcely aware of it in those terms.

As the reading list in the bibliography indicates, I have found it useful to pursue widely the literature stemming from Milgram's work in the last twenty years. Some reinterpretation of his results seems possible to me, in ways that broaden their relevance and apply them to the perspective of leaders as well as followers.

Specifically, one can infer, from some of his and others' data, compelling motives of commitment to agreements, and of conformity: both of which can explain destructive or risky leadership behavior as well.

All of this is directly relevant to the willingness of leaders to choose--and the willingness of subordinates to implement--courses that lead toward catastrophe or massacre: or both, as in Vietnam or on a path to nuclear war.

8. (p. 11) See attached OpEd piece by me, "The Day Castro Almost Started World War III," New York Times, October 31, 1988.

9. (p. 13) See Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy, New York, Bantam Books, 1965, p. 795.

There is a tendency now to conclude that Kennedy's odds on the likelihood of general war were exaggerated. I, on the contrary, have come to believe that Kennedy's odds were realistic, and that my own estimate at the time was far too low. My judgment--when I was 31 and had never been in a war--that Khrushchev was sure to back down because of the military odds against him does not look good in the light of events of the last



quarter century. Leaders, men of power, challenged to accept a humiliating setback, do not often back down when they "ought" to in terms of an objective appraisal of the odds and the long-range interests of their citizens.

It may well be that John F. Kennedy understood this at the time--for himself as well as for Khrushchev--better than I did, and that that was the basis for his higher estimate of the dangers. The fact that Khrushchev did back down I see as the result of special, threatening circumstances, of which President Kennedy and the Excom remained largely unaware. (See my op-ed piece and Seymour Herish's article, attached.)

10. (p. 18) See affidavit, attached.